

The Party of the Extreme Normal

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Maximilian Steinbeis Sa 23 Sep 2017

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On Sunday evening we will know how many of those far-right AfD politicians will be taking place in the next *Bundestag*. What we already know (or [do we?](#)) is that there will be some, and not a few of them. When things get bad, they might even become the third (or... [second?](#)) strongest party group. And once inside, they will not leave anytime soon most likely, even beyond the next four years. What the NPD and other marginal and/or short-lived phenomena of Germany's far right never even came close to achieve, now it happens: the outermost right-wing edge of the political spectrum has arrived in the "centre of democracy" (Paul Kirchhof). Germans use a rather silly word for this sort of thing: *salonfähig*, acceptable to be received into your bourgeois sitting room (as if democracy was anything like a sitting room). By all means, was the consensus of most of the AfD's political opponents so far, don't make them *salonfähig*! Don't talk to them, don't help them overcome their outcast status, don't normalize them! Well, look at them now, as they sit on the sofa and sip on their cup of tea, their dirty boots placed squarely on the velvet cushions. Before long, we will get used to it, though. It will be... kind of normal. In most of Europe, it already is.

For the moment, it seems to be this perspective of normalization that is so particularly disturbing. My Facebook timeline has been screaming with alarms for days: "That's how it started with Hitler, too!" Which is, historically, nonsense, of course. Understandable nonsense, though: Those who put their faith in unmasking the far right as Nazis, whether they profess sympathy for Hitler or not, in order to keep them safely at the margins have fair reason for alarm. That didn't work so well, obviously. Quite the contrary, one might say.

I'd like to spread some hope here, though. The arrival of the AfD in the *Bundestag* will force us to broaden our repertoire in dealing with those guys, and I think that is a good thing. We can't content ourselves anymore with finding *evil* what they say. We will have argue with them about whether or not it is *false*. And I don't see why we'd have to fear this argument.

A considerable part of the positions of the right is based on the premise that one's own is what is normal. Your own people are the normal people. Your own opinions are what normal people think and feel. The people, who is that? Well, us. Normal citizens like us. And "normal" is not meant just empirically, in the sense of "widespread" or "presumably the case". It is meant normatively: the norm. As it should be. Normal as opposed to abnormal. As opposed to those with whom there is something wrong.

From this point of view, the far right distinguishes between "normal" Germans and "abnormal" foreigners, between "normal" whites and "abnormal" blacks, between "normal" father-mother-child families and "abnormal" equality and gender "delusion". And, what's more, from this point of view they deal with criticism: They can't for the life of them see what the whole fuss is about. They are not bad people, are they? Their opinions aren't bad. They are normal. Unlike, apparently, their critics.

This view is utterly immune to contempt, indignation, mockery and moral reproach: all of that just confirms for them how far their critics have strayed from what they perceive as normal. We tried this for so long and so many times, just to watch them getting stronger and stronger. Now they sit in the *Bundestag*.

Let's try something else. What could that be? Together with the historian Per Leo and the philosopher Daniel Pascal Zorn I have been pondering a lot over that question. The result is a little book called *Mit Rechten reden* ("Talking with rights"), which will be [published on October 14th by Klett Cotta](#). To those who read German: A detailed and positive [review](#) has already appeared in *Tagesspiegel* on Friday (blocking period notwithstanding).

So they sit in the *Bundestag* now – fine, let's see if they can convince us. Let's ask them how they justify those norms they assert so confidently. Let's see what they come up with besides more or less sophisticated versions of "Because it just is". Let's ask about the criteria they use for their distinctions. Let's see what they have to offer besides "Well, so that we end up on the side of the normals". Norms of normality remain normal as long as no

one demands a reason. Exclusively heterosexual marriage remained the most normal thing in the world until enough people gathered and asked in a loud and confident voice: why, exactly, do you think that is and should be normal? A question which in the end even many conservatives noticed they couldn't think of a convincing answer to.

I am fully aware that politics is not a seminar, of course. Political arguments are generally seldom won by convincing reasons alone, and normalitarians in particular owe their success not to their arguments but to their skills in picking and cultivating enemies and provoking them to do and say things they can be upset about. But that doesn't mean that we have to play along in this game forever with the same tiresome predictability as we have for so long, do we? Because if we do, if we keep fattening the right in the way we did, they might actually at some point no longer need to convince us at all any more. They will have other means to make us agree.

Germany, with its federal multi-party system of proportional representation, has the great advantage of being fairly non-majoritarian. You may win big at the elections, and nevertheless you won't get your hands on much actual power unless you win other parties over to join your coalition. Luckily, the AfD in all its post-election glory will still be a far cry from actually being in power in terms of changing the laws, sending the police, throwing tax money around etc..

This is what really counts: to keep it that way. To make sure that the power of the state will never fall into the hands of the AfD. Because if it does the AfD will no longer have to convince us. They can use this power instead, as their normalitarian counterparts in Russia, in Hungary, in Turkey already do. (Almost the normality in Europe by now, one might think. But then again, why is and should that be normal?)

Explosions small and large

Speaking of the *Bundestag* elections: For complicated electoral reasons, this ballot could result in an explosion of the number of mandates, one often hears these days. [JEROME SCHRÖDER](#) has looked more closely at whether this is true and what lies behind it – with a surprising result (in German).

Another special feature of the German parliamentary system, somewhat hard to explain abroad, is the fact that two parties, the CSU and the CDU, have been in an agreement for decades to run for the Bundestag one exclusively in the state of Bavaria, the other exclusively in all the rest, to considerable mutual advantages for both. How is that even constitutionally acceptable? [ANNA VON NOTZ](#) has the answer (in German).

At the CJEU in Luxembourg, there is a case pending on the misleadingly so-called "Sharia divorce" and its recognition in Germany. [NADJMA YASSARI](#) explains exactly what exactly this is all about and what the Advocate General's Opinion is making of it (in German).

The Luxembourg decision on refugee resettlement has already sparked intensive [discussions](#) on *Verfassungsblog*, which have found their way into the national [press](#). GABRIELE BUCHHOLTZ defends the Court of Justice from its critics (in German).

Elsewhere

[NICO SCHRÖTER](#) takes the recent election of the future constitutional judge Josef Christ – the first to take place according to new rules in the plenary and not in the secrecy of the electoral committee – as an occasion for a delve into constitutional history (in German).

[STEVE PEERS](#) dismembers Theresa May's Florence Brexit speech.

[ANTHONY SFEZ](#) tries to make sense of who has nullified whose laws in the scarily messy Catalan independence drama (in French).

[SENE GUROL](#) draws our attention to a recent judgment of the ECtHR on gender stereotyping.

[MICHAEL C. DORF](#) considers the latest installment in the series of attempts by the U. S. Republicans to replace

Obamacare to be unconstitutional.

[GAUTAM BHATIA](#) discusses the Indian Supreme Court's radical scepticism towards freedom of speech on the occasion of a new judgement on the ban of a book.

[TOKUJIN MATSUDAIRA](#) reports on Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's shady plans to dissolve parliament on dubious constitutional grounds.

Next week is the last to resolve the Catalan dilemma before the fateful date of October 1st, the day of the independence referendum. ANDRÉS BOIX PALOP will provide in a three piece series an exhaustive account on what this is all about: how the Catalan wish for independence has evolved over the decades without ever being allowed to articulate itself in a procedurally legitimate manner, how this ended in what can be described in a full-blown constitutional crisis, and what to make of the current attempt to stamp out the separatist flames with repressive means on the part of the Spanish government. This will be exciting. Next weekend, I will travel to Barcelona on that day to see for my own what is going on there. Stay tuned!

One more thing: If you would like to share this letter with other potentially interested parties, please feel encouraged to do so. Should you have received it this way and have become curious, do [subscribe](#)!

All best, and take care,

Max Steinbeis

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